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ABSTRACT

The English department at the University of Cincinnati recently initiated an experimental writing course for developmental students who used Apple IIc computers and the Bank Street Writer (BSW) word processing program. BSW was chosen because of its overall simplicity, efficiency, and accessibility. The first two weeks of the course consisted of "play" at the keyboard, followed by two weeks of increasingly structured freewriting activities. In the fifth week, students began a series of assignments designed to help them write a one paragraph essay. In separate class sessions, students (1) retrieved a "topic sentence" file and experimented with supplying supporting details to various sentences, (2) retrieved a "topic sentence into paragraph" file and composed the first draft of a one paragraph essay, (3) revised their first drafts for grammar, (4) broke into groups of three or four to review teacher's comments on style and content and saw the teacher individually, (5) revised their essays to incorporate stylistic revisions, and (6) made final adjustments and printed the final copy. Teachers responded enthusiastically to the program's results, claiming that the computer allowed more efficient use of class time and resulted in excellent student writing samples. (One student's completed set of assignments is included.) (JD)

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REVISION AND SATISFACTION USING THE BANK STREET WRITER

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Revision and Satisfaction Using the Bank Street Writer

During the past year, the English for Effective Communication (EEC) department at University College of the University of Cincinnati has initiated an experimental program involving computer-assisted writing for developmental students. Financially, the establishment of this program has been an ambitious undertaking. A classroom was outfitted with 17 Apple IIe computers--to match the mandated maximum EEC class size--and 4 Imagewriter printers. We stocked a supply of blank diskettes and also, after considerable discussion and with much trepidation--our collective computer experience was, to say the least, negligible--invested in the Bank Street Writer word processing program.

Why Bank Street?

The overriding reason that led us to choose BSW over the many other serviceable word processing programs now available was its simplicity. Unlike, say, Word Perfect, BSW encloses its composing space in a rectangular container, and displays relevant functions at the top of the screen. This instructional readout, combined with a very nutsy-boltsy Directions handout (written by me, not by Apple, Inc.) enables even the rank beginner to move quickly past the "Omigosh-it´s-a-MACHINE" stage and into composing at the keyboard. To make the student´s job easier still, we set up

the basic format in such a way that by simply selecting an option and pressing RETURN a number of times, the writer generates an acceptable draft or final copy. In other words, the student need not decide whether or not to skip lines, whether or not to pause between pages, how many spaces to leave for margins, how many characters in a line, and so forth. There are two and only two print options--DRAFT and FINAL. PRINT-DRAFT produces a narrow column of text with extra-wide margins for editing [see "DRAFT1," pp.15-16]. I require my students to use this option for all drafts, although to save space, I have included Drafts 2 and 3 printed as "FINAL." This option expands to the normal 80-character line; my students select PRINT-FINAL only for the final version of an essay.

Here I should interject a brief comment concerning the function and the limitation of the Bank Street Writer. It is not designed for grammar exercises, nor do we permit automated revision. Students who wish to use computers for mechanical exercises elect a one-credit workshop at the university's Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) lab. A Speller program exists for BSW, and our department owns a copy, but we require our students to undertake their own revisions without mechanized help. The one technical problem we have encountered with the BSW results from the company's fear that users will copy the program. In their paranoia, Broderbund's programmers have scrambled the program so thoroughly that occasionally it simply will not load into the computer. Often simply rebooting

the machine will suffice to load BSW; if this fails, we try the disk on another machine.

BSW and the Developmental Writer

Despite its overall efficiency and accessibility, however, Bank Street Writer cannot prevent three basic problems which are especially severe in developmental writers:

1. Fear of technology. This problem affects society as a whole, of course, but is particularly damaging to the below-average student who by the thirteenth year of school has been thoroughly programmed to fail.

2. Unfamiliarity with the typewriter keyboard. It came as a surprise to me that a significant percentage of EEC students had never before used a typewriter. Not only did they need to learn how to operate the computer, but they also had to figure out how to make a capital letter and get to the next line.

3. Wide discrepancy in skill level within a single class. What does a professor do in a computer lab when Student A finishes all assigned work and gives herself a manicure, Student B struggles through just in time, Student C writes two sentences laboriously, and Student D still can't figure out how to skip a space between words?

There are no pat answers to these problems, but some fairly serviceable solutions come to mind. When dealing with the student who is afraid to operate a computer, the instructor's attitude is a key factor. We who are initiates

into the arcane mysteries of computer technology (and especially those of us who are relatively recent converts) possess the annoying tendency to approach word processing with messianic zeal. Naturally some of our students shy away. But if we approach computer lab teaching with a healthy recognition of the limitations of computers, many students will respond to the machine as an opportunity, not an obstacle. We must allow students to use computers, not force them. I now permit stubbornly recalcitrant non-cooperants to handwrite their work, so long as they give the computers a try early in the quarter. It is simply not worth the hassle to prod a student who is a willing writer but an unwilling word processor.

To help those students who are entirely unfamiliar with the keyboard, we must introduce computer skills without pressuring students to come up with a final product too early in the learning process. I devote at least the first two weeks (four computer lab sessions) of a quarter to allowing students to play at the keyboard and explore the potential of the computer. It is an absolute necessity that we make the introduction to word processing leisurely enough to familiarize even the truly uninitiated with the basics of typing and computer operation. I use in-class tutors freely here (each EEC class at UC involves the professor and two tutors, who are present on "lab" days twice a week), working one on one with the slowest students if possible.

The first "assignments" of each quarter are freewriting,

with no specified length requirements and almost no rules governing subject matter and style. This open-ended format tends to equalize students of all skill levels, at least at the beginning. As the course progresses, however, there is really no way to keep the laggards producing at the same level as the better writers; this, of course, is the dilemma faced by all teachers. A computer does not work miracles in the writing classroom. But it seems to me that good use of the Bank Street Writer can allow students to maximize their potential. And isn't that all we can ask of any student?

BSW at Work in the Classroom

Let me devote the next segment of this article to describing how one series of assignments can help a student produce a very satisfying final product. This assignment series begins in the fifth week of the course, after two weeks of "play" at the keyboard, and an additional two weeks of increasingly structured freewriting activities.

COMPUTER LAB CLASS 1

Students retrieve the "Topic Sentences" file ("TS-EX," pp.10-11) from their disks (secretary has copied this file onto student disks earlier). On the screen they see ten topic sentences, graded from easiest to most difficult. Below each sentence are numbers 1, 2, and 3. Students spend the entire 50-minute class period supplying three (or more) supporting details for each topic sentence. At the end of class, they

save what they have written (file "TS-FRAN," pp.12-14), print their material as PRINT-FINAL, and take the printout home to revise and/or finish. As part of this home phase they are asked to pick one set of sentences to use as a paragraph topic on the next lab day.

COMPUTER LAB CLASS 2

Students retrieve the "Topic Sentence Into Paragraph" file ("TS-PARA") from their disks (also copied there by the secretary ahead of time). They see on their screen only a set of directions for writing a paragraph (see top of "DRAFT1" page). Below these directions students compose a first draft of a one-paragraph essay on one of the topic sentence-supporting details sets from their "TS-FRAN" file. At the end of class they save their draft, print, and turn this copy in to me.

COMPUTER LAB CLASS 3

At the beginning of class I return "DRAFT1" with my written comments. Students spend this class hour revising for grammar and getting help from me or tutors as needed. At the end of class they save the new draft ("DRAFT2"), print, and turn in this copy to me.

CLASS 4 (in regular classroom)

At the beginning of class I return "DRAFT2" with my written comments on style and content (pp.17-18). The class then breaks into groups of three or four to review these comments, with me present on a rotating basis. [Note: the class will

have worked on group learning skills throughout the quarter, so this session should not disintegrate into utter chaos.] I talk individually with each student for a short time during this class hour, and make appointments to meet some students in my office later. Students take "DRAFT2" home for further thought and planning.

COMPUTER LAB CLASS 5

Back to the keyboard. With me and tutors on call, students embark on their next draft, incorporating stylistic revisions. At the end of class, they save "DRAFT3," print, and turn this copy in to me.

COMPUTER LAB CLASS 6

At the beginning of class I return "DRAFT3" with my written comments (pp.19-20). Students do a final cleanup and print "DRAFT4"(pp.21-22). They submit this to me or to a tutor during class. We write a short statement of approval on the bottom of the page and return it to the student. At this point, the student makes any final corrections, deletes the directions at the top of the page, and prints as PRINT-FINAL (p.23). The student submits all drafts to me and the assignment is finished.

Good Results with BSW

As should be apparent from the huge progress "Fran" has made between "DRAFT1" and "FINAL," it is possible for a developmental writing student to produce a very fine piece of

work using the computer. Since word processing is a relatively new option within the EEC program at UC, I do not have a systematic evaluative sample from all students who have used the Apple IIe/Bank Street Writer. I have, however, saved written comments from all of my own computer lab students (60 total since September 1985). More than 80% of this group indicated that they really felt good about themselves after learning to use the word processor. One student wrote, "I never used a computer before and I'm glad I know how." A smaller but still significant percentage of this sample group (60%) wrote that using the computer allowed them to produce a higher quality of writing than they thought they were capable of; "Every time I see the final thing I am amazed to think I wrote that." Finally, a number of students (40%) commented that the computer aided them in editing their work; "I always thought what I wrote was permanent. The computer helped me learn to revise." On the whole, these students express strong feelings of satisfaction concerning their experience using a word processor.

After speaking to the four in-class tutors who worked with my classes during the past two quarters, I have found them to have positive feelings toward the Apple/BSW labs. They cite four good results: the computers allow tutors to use their time efficiently in class; the Bank Street Writer was a simple enough program that tutors could quickly become competent to train students to use it; the tutors were pleased to know about

basic word processing, and are using the Apple for their own work; and finally, they feel that students respond to them as professionals more than in the normal class setting. [This is an issue I would like to explore further in the future.]

My own response as an instructor is also for the most part a positive one. I do not believe computers will miraculously turn semi-literate individuals into great writers; and I have my suspicions of composition teachers who claim that articulate prose flows out like water the minute student writers sit down at a keyboard. But my general feeling about teaching is that I have fun when my students are having fun; and most of them certainly seem to enjoy using a computer. More important, the instructor-student-computer collaboration I have described in this article has been conducive to the production of an exceedingly high level of performance from students whose writing ability was severely impaired at the outset of the course. I'm a pragmatist, and I'll use any method that gets results. And I must say that so far, the Apple/BSW combination has delivered the results my students want and need.

File Name "TS-EX"

TOPIC SENTENCES

DIRECTIONS: Supply at least 3 (or more) supporting details for each of the following topic sentences.

1. College is very different from high school.

   a.

   b.

   c.

2. Wendy's hamburgers are better than McDonalds'.

   a.

   b.

   c.

3. Schools should do away with letter grades.

   a.

   b.

   c.

4. My favorite sport is _____.

   a.

   b.

   c.

5. My favorite TV show is _____.

   a.

   b.

   c.

6. My favorite radio station is _____.

a.

b.

c.

7. The best book I ever read was _____.

a.

b.

c.

8. The Beatles were the most significant rock group ever.

a.

b.

c.

9. Cincinnati is a very conservative city.

a.

b.

c.

10. The only evil is disunity.

a.

b.

c.

File Name "TS-FRAN"

TOPIC SENTENCES

DIRECTIONS: Supply at least 3 (or more) supporting details for each of the following topic sentences.

1. College is very different from high school.

a. In high school you are all in one building all day long, in college you have to run all over a huge campus.

b. In high school the teachers were always on your case to get your work done, in college the professors let you sink or swim by yourself.

c. When I was in high school my mom wouldn't let me go out when I had schoolwork to do, now in college I have to budget my own time.

2. Wendy's hamburgers are better than McDonalds'.

a. Wendys makes them your way, McD's you have to wait forever to get any kind of special order.

b. Wendys cooks fresh, mcD's uses a heat lamp.

c. Wendys burgers are a quarter lb after cooking, McD's are a quarter lb before cooking; at Wendys you get more meat.

3. Schools should do away with letter grades.

a. Letters are only shorthand, they dont really tell about your ability.

b. Students always compare grades, this makes competition which reduces good feelings.

c. Letters are like id numbers, they make you feel like your not a person, if teachers did written evaluations you would feel like an individual, not a number.

4. My favorite sport is volleyball.

a. Its a team sport, even with one or two superstar players you can't win without great teamwork.

b. Some people think you have to be tall to be good, but I'm only 5-3 and I was the setter for my high school team.

c. Volleyball needs quick reflexes.

5. My favorite TV show is The Cosby Show.

a. It shows the kind of situations you see in real families.

b. It is real funny I lauhg all the time when I watch it.

c. It presents a positive image of Blacks.

6. My favorite radio station is WDJO.

a. I like oldies, and they play all oldies.

b. They dont have a lot of comercials.

c. Dick Clark does a profile on a different rock superstar every Sunday at 5.

7. The best book I ever read was Call of the Wild.

a. It got inside Buck's head, and I never thought you could do that in a book.

b. It told more about the animals than the people.

c. I got really into it and it ended before I wanted it to.

8. The Beatles were the most significant rock group ever.

a. They had more top 10 hits than any body.

b. They came along just when things were changing, and they led the way for lots of the changes, like long hair, drugs, peace ect.

c. John and Paul wrote music that will never die.

9. Cincinnati is a very conservative city.

a. No dirty movies.

b. Big fight over smoking in public places.

c. City council is made up of 8 white guys and 1 Black guy who might as well be white, all the women and liberals got voted out last year.

10. The only evil is disunity.

a. Mass murder, the holocust, Cambodia, they happen because groups of people cut themselves off from others.

b. Prejudice and racism are because people do not live as one.

c. Most psychological diseases are because people get split apart inside.

File Name "DRAFT1"

TOPIC SENTENCE INTO PARAGRAPH

DIRECTIONS: Use one of the [topic sentence + details] groups from your "TS-EX" file and turn it into a paragraph. Remember to begin with the topic sentence, use transition words where appropriate, give plenty of detail, and end with a closing sentence.

Indent → Schools should do away with letter grades. Firstly, letter grades are only a kind of shorthand, they dont CS really tell about your ability. Secondly, students always compare grades with each other; this makes them get into heavy competiton. When your too competitive it gets in the way of friendships. Thirdly, letters are kind of like student id numbers and they make you feel your not a person. On the other hand, if teachers had to write a written evaluation of each studen~~t~~ ~~e~~taed of just giving a

Can you find some better words to replace "firstly, secondly, thirdly?"

letter grade, you would feel like a individual not just a number. So in conclusion, we should eliminate letter grades so as to make students feel more human. This will make school a better atmosphere.

1st revision - let's clean up the mechanical problems, then submit for stylistic review.

File Name "DRAFT2"

TOPIC SENTENCE INTO PARAGRAPH

DIRECTIONS: Use one of the [topic sentence + details] groups from your "TS-EX" file and turn it into a paragraph. Remember to begin with the topic sentence, use transition words where appropriate, give plenty of detail, and end with a closing sentence.

Schools should do away with letter grades. In the first place, letter grades are only a kind of shorthand; they don't really tell about your ability. Moreover, students always compare grades with each other; this makes them get into heavy competition. When you're too competitive it gets in the way of friendships. But most important, letters are kind of like student identification numbers and they make you feel you're not a person. On the other hand, if teachers had to write a

concrete example here?

pronoun shift (throughout) – settle on one for the entire ¶

too slangy

concrete example?

letter grades?

concrete example?

written evaluation of each student
instead of just giving a letter grade,
you would feel like an individual, not
just a number. So in conclusion, we → is this the pronoun you want here?
should eliminate letter grades so as
to make students feel more human.
This will make school a better
atmosphere. ?

unclear ref

I see improvement - let's talk.

File Name "DRAFT3"

TOPIC SENTENCE INTO PARAGRAPH

DIRECTIONS: Use one of the [topic sentence + details] groups from your "TS-EX" file and turn it into a paragraph. Remember to begin with the topic sentence, use transition words where appropriate, give plenty of detail, and end with a closing sentence.

I think your T.S. is not actually about "schools" but about UC in particular. Shouldn't you change your T.S. to reflect this?

Schools should do away with letter grades. In the first place, letter grades are only a kind of shorthand; they don't really tell about a student's ability. For instance, if you receive an A in a class, and I receive a B, the only thing that is proved is that you did better than I did; no one can tell exactly what either of us learned. Moreover, students always compare grades with each other; this makes them intensely competetive. It's common knowledge that medical students

This might be better stated

frequently sabotage each other's experiments; clearly, too much competition gets in the way of friendships. But most important, letter grades (are kind of like) student identification numbers, which make students feel that the university is a very impersonal place. Any UC student knows the frustration of trying to unscramble a fouled-up computer printout at the beginning of a quarter; the little letters and numbers on the report card end each quarter the same way. But if [teachers] had to write a written evaluation of each student instead of just giving a letter grade, students would feel like individuals, not just numbers. So in conclusion, the university should eliminate letter grades so as to make students feel more human. This change will bring about a better atmosphere at UC.

Do the two halves of this sentence really deal with the same issue?

wh

This word should probably be changed to reflect the t.s.

Excellent revision – can you do a final cleanup?

File Name "DRAFT4"

TOPIC SENTENCE INTO PARAGRAPH

DIRECTIONS: Use one of the [topic sentence + details] groups from your "TS-EX" file and turn it into a paragraph. Remember to begin with the topic sentence, use transition words where appropriate, give plenty of detail, and end with a closing sentence.

The University of Cincinnati should do away with letter grades. In the first place, letter grades are only a kind of shorthand; they don't really tell about a student's ability. For instance, if you receive an A in a class, and I receive a B, the only thing that is proved is that you did better than I did; the letters tell nothing about our actual learning. Moreover, students always compare grades with each other; this makes them intensely competitive. It's common knowledge that medical students

frequently sabotage each other's experiments; clearly, too much competition interferes with both their education and their relationship to their classmates. But most important, letter grades resemble student identification numbers, which make students feel that the university is a very impersonal place. Any UC student knows the frustration of trying to unscramble a fouled-up computer printout at the beginning of a quarter; the little letters and numbers on the report card end each quarter the same way. But if faculty members had to write a written evaluation of each student instead of just giving a letter grade, students would feel like individuals, not just numbers. So in conclusion, the university should eliminate letter grades so as to make students feel more human. This change will bring about a better atmosphere at UC.

Good work - it's a wrap! Delete the "Directions" section and print a final copy.

File Name "FINAL"

The University of Cincinnati should do away with letter grades. In the first place, letter grades are only a kind of shorthand; they don't really tell about a student's ability. For instance, if you receive an A in a class, and I receive a B, the only thing that is proved is that you did better than I did; the letters tell nothing about our actual learning. Moreover, students always compare grades with each other; this makes them intensely competitive. It's common knowledge that medical students frequently sabotage each other's experiments; clearly, too much competition interferes with both their education and their relationship to their classmates. But most important, letter grades resemble student identification numbers, which make students feel that the university is a very impersonal place. Any UC student knows the frustration of trying to unscramble a fouled-up computer printout at the beginning of a quarter; the little letters and numbers on the report card end each quarter the same way. But if faculty members had to write a written evaluation of each student instead of just giving a letter grade, students would feel like individuals, not just numbers. So in conclusion, the university should eliminate letter grades so as to make students feel more human. This change will bring about a better atmosphere at UC.